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Washington, 7 January (WashingtonTV)—Syria's President Bashar al-Assad on Thursday called on the United States to play a stronger role in the Middle East, during a meeting with US Congressman Alcee Hastings in Damascus.

According to Syria's state-run SANA news agency, Assad said that the real obstacle to the peace process was the "absence of an Israeli partner ready for peace".

On Monday, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the Obama administration would be "even more committed" in 2010 to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Clinton and US Middle East envoy, George Mitchell, are scheduled to meet with Egyptian and Jordanian officials in Washington this week, for talks on moving the peace process forward.

Mitchell is expected to return to the region next week, an Israeli official in Washington told the Haaretz newspaper.

During his meeting with Assad, Congressman Hastings voiced hope for greater Washington-Damascus ties, which he said were in the interests of the two countries and those of the whole region.

The Obama administration has stepped up efforts to engage Syria, a former foe, and push the country away from its alliance with Iran and its support of militant groups, including Hezbollah and Hamas.

Sources: SANA news agency, US State Department website, Haaretz newspaper

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